

# Profiles in Arson: The Serial Firesetter

**B**eginning this month, AFJ will publish a series focusing on the fire investigator's concerns.

*Penned by Correspondent John Orr, senior investigator with the Glendale (CA) Fire Investigation Unit, it will examine the motives for arson—pyromania, revenge, insurance fraud, crime concealment, civil disorder and vanity. It is hoped that by taking a look at an example of each of these cases, readers will be able to "get inside the mind" of the arsonist in order to better prevent and stop these crimes.*

*This month's case history is that of "Pogo\*," a serial arsonist. Of all the different types of arson, serial fire-setting can be one of the more difficult to bring to a successful conclusion by arrest. A serial arsonist case requires considerably more cooperation between firefighters, arson investigators and police to even begin to profile the responsible party, let alone identify and arrest him or her.*

*The following real case took eight months to finalize, but ultimate cooperation between agencies stopped this series of fires that did almost \$100,000 in damage.*

It flared up much quicker than he expected.

He figured it would take a while for the fire to gain headway inside the Ford before it could be seen on the poorly-lit residential street. He was wrong.

Pogo was only a half-block away, and already there was a flickering beginning in the bushes next to the car. He couldn't quite see the flames yet, but the glow from the fire silhouetted the car's roof line. Now he saw smoke.

At this hour, just after 1 a.m., there was no one else around, but Pogo began to sweat, thinking he would be seen. Just ahead of him, a car turned onto Rockglen Avenue, heading towards the burning vehicle. Pogo

**This is the first of a six-part series presenting case histories of the motives for arson.**

**By JOHN ORR**  
AFJ Correspondent

quickly stepped in between two cypress trees as the car raced past, only 15 feet away.

The burning car was parked in a driveway only a few feet from the street, yet the driver sped by without even slowing. Puzzled, Pogo stepped into the street to view the flames. He then saw that a large tree had partially blocked the driver's view as he went by.

Pogo knew he had time to watch the fire a little longer. He stared in open-mouthed fascination at the flames' rapid progression.

From Pogo's vantage point next to the cypress trees, he saw pieces of the car's headliner dropping in flames to the already-burning seats. With a loud pop, the passenger window, partially rolled down, shattered from the heat.

The sound startled Pogo as if a gun had gone off. Less than 150 feet from the car, he nevertheless stood transfixed. He couldn't bear to leave now.

Only two minutes had passed since the fire began. Pogo had set it when he couldn't find anything worth stealing from the unlocked vehicle.

As he stood gazing at the fire, he saw his own shadow against a parked car in front of him. Before he realized it, a car drove past him.

Again, a convenient tree covered Pogo's presence. This time, however, the passing car slammed on its brakes and the driver began sounding the horn. Pogo again slipped back between the cypress trees.

The driver of the passing car turned towards Pogo's hiding place and shouted, "Fire! Fire!" It was almost as if he were asking Pogo to report

it. Pogo debated running away, but decided that the driver hadn't seen him and was only panicked.

Pogo peeked out and saw the driver pull his car to the side of the street while still sounding his horn. Pogo felt safe in his hiding place and was still fascinated by what was taking place down the street.

He caught himself shivering uncontrollably and remembered that he first felt the sensation as he was walking away from the car. The shivers were as if he was cold, but it was May and very warm for this time of the night.

He took a deep breath and found he was settling down, excited, not scared. He put his hands in his pants pockets and started to relax.

At the same time, he heard a distant siren and saw several people walking onto the street across from the burning car. He heard a clanking noise not six feet away as a man and woman opened the apartment's wrought-iron gate and stepped to the sidewalk.

Pogo stifled a laugh as the man and woman saw the burning car. Their hands covered their mouths and they said, "Oh my God!" almost in unison.

Feeling more comfortable, Pogo stuck his head out from behind the trees and saw several more people walking down the street from behind him. As if there were a barrier, they stopped where the other couple stood. Soon three more neighbors stopped at the same place on the sidewalk, only a few feet from Pogo.

A siren and air horn pierced the air as Engine 25 turned onto Rockglen and drove by Pogo. As it passed, he again began shivering uncontrollably and found himself stepping onto the sidewalk. He didn't know why he did it, but he found himself now mingling with the seven or eight other people.

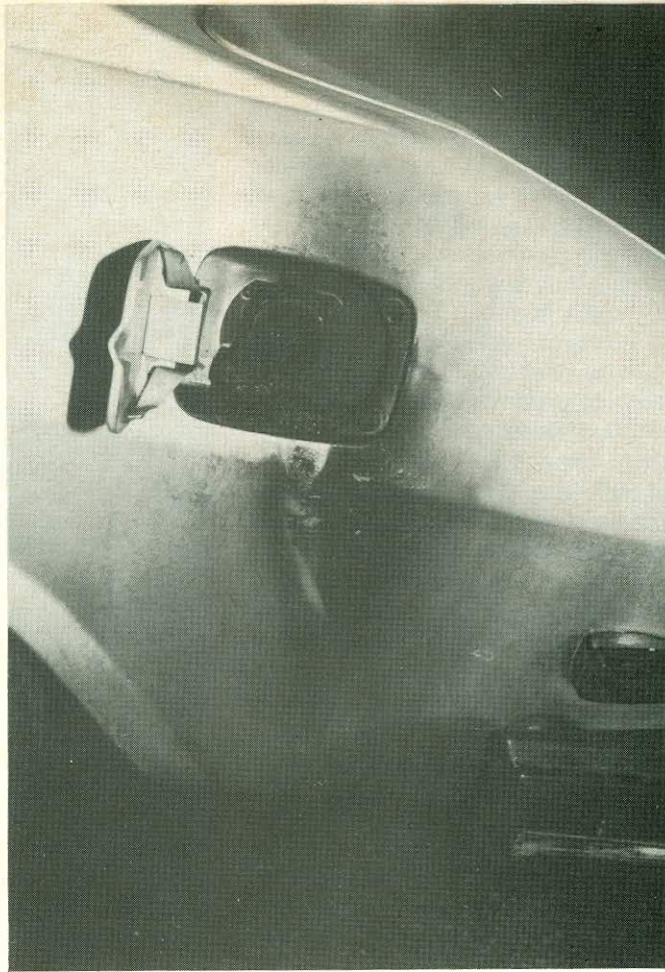
He listened as they commented on

*\*Names of suspects have been*





*The MG's convertible window was found discarded on the sidewalk after it was cut out to gain entry.*



*Here, Pogo varied his M.O. — with unsatisfactory results — by stuffing a gas-soaked rag in the fill pipe of a Mazda. It burned itself out.*

how long it took the fire department to arrive, and how fortunate that the car didn't explode like they do on TV. Pogo, too, wondered why it didn't blow up.

The entire passenger compartment of the copper-colored Ford was now involved, but Pogo was concentrating on the crowd of people. Again he had to stifle a laugh at how frightened everyone was and how funny they looked, standing there in their nightclothes, or half dressed.

As the firefighters squirmed water on the blazing mass, one of the crowd said, "I wonder how it started?" Another answered, "Probably an electrical short."

Pogo smiled and wanted to tell the person how stupid he was to think that the fire was an accident. Instead, he rather unsteadily crossed the street, by now feeling the six beers he had consumed earlier. He tried to walk casually, but felt that people were watching him.

He turned his head and saw one woman looking at him. This made him uncomfortable, and he walked up a

small path leading to an apartment, in hope the woman would think he lived there.

He looked back over his shoulder. She had returned her attention to the fire.

Pogo, too, looked towards the fire and saw a large cloud of white steam where the fire was only moments before. Pogo felt disappointment. People were walking back to their homes.

He was no longer excited. Shoulders drooping and stomach muscles relaxed, Pogo walked home, two blocks away, but couldn't sleep for several hours.

As he lay on his bed and relived the fire in his mind, Pogo felt warm inside. He enjoyed the incident immensely; he had never felt this kind of excitement before.

The feeling was very similar to when he had shoplifted, but not quite. When he entered a store, knowing he was going to steal something, he got excited and sometimes shivered, but that was nowhere near what he felt after he set the car on fire . . .

Pogo, 19, did bear some resemblance to the comic strip character. His nose was a bit mishappen and long, and he had a kind of unbalanced walk, even when sober. When he was

in elementary school, he was quiet and had few friends, but did fairly well academically.

It wasn't until junior high school that the youth's rapidly-growing body caused his physical appearance to be noticed. After his nose was broken in an after-school fight, his lack of coordination and funny appearance resulted in the "Pogo" nickname. As the teasing escalated, he withdrew, preferring to be alone and only occasionally seeing his friends.

Pogo felt comforted at night when he would go on long, solitary walks. He drank frequently and was arrested twice for being intoxicated and being a minor in possession of alcohol. He was also arrested twice for burglary, one just three weeks before the Ford fire.

It was after this arrest that he decided he wouldn't break into anything anymore. Entering unlocked cars and buildings was usually just a misdemeanor, not a felony like burglary. At least that's what his friends said.

*Continued on next page*



# INVESTIGATE...

*Continued from previous page*

Pogo entered several cars a night and sometimes was lucky to find a gasoline credit card or loose change he could use to fund the occasional parties he attended. Most of the time he found nothing, and it upset him. It was this feeling that inspired him to set the Ford on fire.

However, unknown to Pogo, his activities did not go unnoticed. Most people were aware someone had rifled their car but only those who lost something reported it to the police.

Still, there were one or two reports per night within a 10-block radius of Pogo's home. Detectives picked up on this trend of auto burglaries, but, then, this sort of thing was also happening in other residential areas.

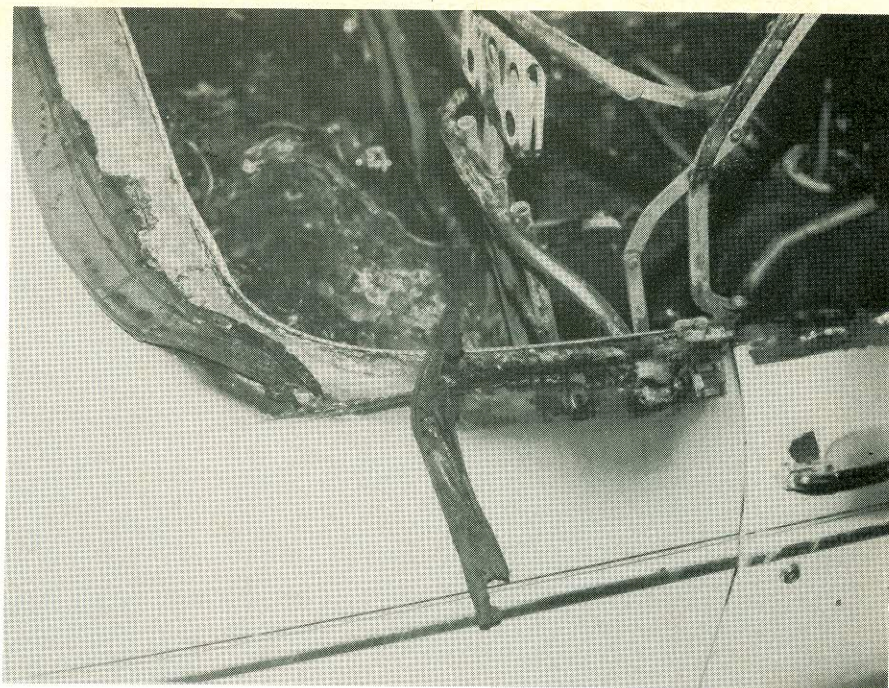
It wasn't until Pogo set his third car fire that it was brought to the attention of arson investigators. The first two fires were written off as being caused by "electrical shorting."

The third fire, inside a subterranean carport, was noticed when a sprinkler head fused and set off an alarm. A resident quickly extinguished the fire, which was confined to the dashboard and headliner. It had obviously originated inside the glovebox. The first-in fire officer requested an investigator when he saw that the glovebox's contents were scattered around the passenger seat area.

When the investigator arrived, he was approached by the fire officer and told that this car fire was the third to occur at about 1 a.m. in the past 10 days in the district. The other fires, the officer explained, were in cars parked in the street. Both were on "B" shift and were deemed accidental, but, somehow, this was too much of a coincidence.

Over the past weeks, the arson investigator had been experiencing a particularly busy period of fire activity and hadn't had time to examine the other two cars. Even though the fire reports called them accidental, he knew that most firefighters lacked training in cause-and-origin recognition and an "electrical short" determination might have been an easy solution. The investigator decided to look at the other two cars, if they were still around.

This fire was found to have initiated in common combustibles in the glovebox and been intentionally set. No viable accidental cause could be found.



*The burned-out MG that caused Pogo's last arrest. He removed the side window before igniting the interior.*

The other two cars were examined that same day and also found to have been arson set. Both fires began on the passenger seats. The Ford seat and floorboard were cluttered with items from the glovebox, again, as if it had been gone through and the contents scattered.

In the other car, the passenger seat had been set on fire.

For several weeks, there were no more fires. The arson investigator did, however, learn of several police reports of items stolen from cars in the area where the fires had occurred.

Then, on June 16 and 19, two other arson-caused car fires were set in the area. Again, interiors were gutted. The fires occurred, respectively, at 2:15 a.m. and 1 a.m. But still there were no solid leads or suspects.

On the morning of July 5, at 1:45 a.m., Pogo was caught by an apartment resident. He had been trying to enter a car in a subterranean garage. Pogo was arrested for attempted burglary. His parents bailed him out the next day.

The arson investigator saw Pogo's arrest report. Pogo's listed home address was in the center of the area where the car fires were occurring. The latest arrest took place less than two blocks from Pogo's home.

A background check showed no previous arson arrests or fire department contacts, not even for juvenile firesetting. Information did reveal that Pogo was a loner, and a heavy drinker; also, that he had dropped

out of high school and had a poor job history, almost non-existent, actually.

All of these items are classic pyromania indicators. "Pyros" are generally loners, unable to establish solid roots in jobs or relationships. Many drink heavily.

A loose surveillance was conducted by the arson investigator, but a one-man operation was almost impossible. He did learn, however, that Pogo kept late hours.

The investigator chose not to make contact, since the evidence at this point was extremely circumstantial. Then Pogo struck again.

On August 5, a car was set on fire in a carport just four blocks from Pogo's home. The 3:45 a.m. fire destroyed six other cars, the carport and damaged a nearby apartment building and two more cars. Losses were set at \$43,000.

Ironically, three \$100 bills were found in a wallet under the seat of the car where the fire began. Pogo had missed them.

Then, on August 16, at 3:30 a.m., still another car was set on fire. It belonged to the apartment dweller that had apprehended Pogo and had him arrested in the carport on July 5. The car was set on fire, possibly by use of gasoline this time, in the very parking stall where Pogo was detained.

The police department now agreed to provide manpower for a surveillance of the suspect. The surveillance team, comprised of four undercover police officers and three arson investigators,





*Pogo's last fire before his arrest was witnessed by his girlfriend. He removed the MG's side window before igniting the interior.*

began following the suspect at 8 p.m. on a Tuesday evening.

Pogo was located that evening at one of his favorite hang-outs, a McDonalds restaurant. He was with several friends. They all left the McDonalds at 9:15 p.m. and walked down several darkened streets.

The trio split up on several occasions to look in parked cars, windows and carports. No vehicles were entered.

At 11 p.m., Pogo and his buddies bought beer and each consumed some of it at a high school tennis court. At 11:30 p.m., Pogo left the group and headed home.

Shortly after Pogo arrived at his house, his father got home from work. At 12:15 a.m., Pogo was seen climbing out of his bedroom window and walking west, away from his house. Within two blocks, several of the surveillance vehicles were abandoned in favor of foot observation, as the dimly-lit, tree-lined streets made it difficult to watch Pogo from a car.

On the first night, Pogo entered three cars and stole nothing but loose change. He disappeared behind one home and was later seen standing outside an open window for about an hour.

Pogo did nothing that could be seen from a distance but stand there staring in the window. It was later found that an eight-year-old and a nine-year-old girl were asleep in the bedroom.

Pogo went home at 3:50 a.m. without setting a fire.

For the next five nights, the surveillance continued. On two nights, Pogo stayed home. The other nights he went through at least seven other cars, netting about four dollars in change. He watched the little girls on one more occasion, this time for 30 minutes.

On August 27, Pogo began serving a 30-day sentence on the attempted burglary charge from his July 5 arrest. The district attorney refused to file charges of arson at this time.

There was no suspicious vehicle fires in the city during his incarceration. Upon his release from jail, Pogo obtained a part-time job three days a week.

Two weeks after his release, another vehicle sustained minor fire damage in the glovebox area. This fire, however, occurred two miles from Pogo's home and at 11:15 p.m. No suspects were seen.

While responding to this fire, the investigator watched for Pogo and later checked the area, but failed to find him.

Pogo began working a full-time job in September but was fired in late November.

On December 14, a vehicle arson fire was reported six blocks from Pogo's home. While driving to the 10 p.m. fire, the investigator spotted Pogo. The youth was in front of the apartment building that on August 5 had sustained the \$43,000 loss. He was in the company of two female and one male juvenile.

Arriving Engine 25 reported attempted arson by a rag stuffed in a gas-filler pipe.

The investigator watched as Pogo and his friends walked towards the site of last spring's Ford fire.

Within five minutes of the investigator's arrival at the attempted arson, another vehicle arson was reported nearby. After confiscating the gasoline-soaked rag from the fill pipe, the investigator raced to the scene to find a MG convertible sports car with the interior well-involved. He also found Pogo, standing by a group of people, near two cypress trees.

Pogo stepped back between the trees as people walked by. The investigator parked a half block away and watched through binoculars.

Pogo returned to the sidewalk and watched until the fire was knocked down. The investigator started his car and pulled out from his semi-concealed location.

As the investigator's car headlights illuminated Pogo, the young suspect's pace quickened. Intentionally gunning the motor, the investigator drove on the wrong side of the street towards Pogo. Pogo began running.

The investigator caught Pogo about 50 yards from his home. He was handcuffed by backup police officers. It was noticed that he had a pronounced gasoline smell about his clothing and hands.

A cloth similar to the one from the gasoline fill pipe found earlier, was found inside Pogo's jacket pocket. Pogo said he had heard the fire engines and just walked over to watch the fire. The gasoline smell was from helping an unnamed friend jump start his car earlier in the evening.

Pogo was returned to the burned MG. The convertible top's small rear window was found unburned on the ground next to the car. It had been cut out prior to the fire.

Footprints were found in soft dirt along the parkway next to the car. The investigator examined Pogo's shoes. Their soles matched the footprints next to the MG.

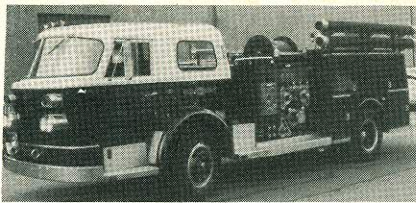
Turning around, the investigator saw one of the female juveniles Pogo was with earlier. She was standing next to the MG, right in the middle of the footprints. She too was arrested, for destroying evidence.

After booking the two into the jail, interviews with both were held. After Pogo was read his rights, he agreed to talk to the arson investigator. But

*Continued on page 32*



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Contact Chief Sample, Lake Oswego Fire Department (503) 635-0275 for information or viewing of vehicle and equipment.

Submit bid with name, address, and bid amount in envelope marked "surplus engine" to: City of Lake Oswego Fire Department, P.O. Box 369, Lake Oswego, OR 97034. Bids must be received by the city no later than March 1, 1989. This vehicle shall be purchased as is, where is; no warranties are expressed or implied. The city of Lake Oswego reserves the right to reject any and all bids.

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## Fire Code

*Continued from page 8*

overlapped or criss-crossed, due to the cable having lost its self-regulating characteristics.

As heat builds up again, the arc and fire leapfrog to the next-closest hot spot, possibly a distance of 20 to 60 feet in a single leap.

When the cable arcs and burns, it is normally at the rate of seven to 10 feet per hour. When the cables buried in the soil arc and burn, it is at a much slower rate.

Those units with a protective overbraid appear to be safer, as the metallic braid acts as both a heat sink and a protective grounding path. All manufacturers recommend the use of a ground fault protective device to eliminate fire hazard, but this was not used in the majority of liability claims for significant property damage.

It has been reported that several mobile home fires have occurred where self-regulating cable was plugged into an outdoor outlet containing a ground fault detector. Many cables applied on plastic pipe do not short to ground to create the nominal 30 milliamps needed to trip the GFCI devices.

Under ideal conditions, self-regulating cable has a great deal of merit, but, if mechanically damaged and/or placed in a moist environment, it will "burn like a welding rod." With a toe-

hold in an estimated 20 percent of the residential, electrical and mobile home markets, this type of product appears to have far more liability risk than estimated profits. Surely something will have to change if self-regulating cable is to reach its full potential.

**For Further Information see "Building Construction for the Fire Service," by Brannigan, available from NFPA, Quincy, MA 02269. Call 1-800/344-3555. Credit cards OK. NFPA Price \$35. plus \$2.85 shipping and handling. Autographed copies from Brannigan, postpaid, Port Republic, MD 02676. \$29.50.**

## INVESTIGATE...

*Continued from page 27*

Pogo had been drinking, and the investigator felt this might jeopardize the interview, so it was called off until Pogo had slept it off.

The female was interviewed and readily admitted seeing Pogo attempt to burn the car by stuffing a rag into the gas tank. She also related that Pogo borrowed her knife to cut out the MG's convertible window before he set it on fire.

She added that she had been Pogo's girlfriend for several weeks and he did talk of "blowing up" a Ford on Rockglen as well as bragging that he once blew up six cars at once.

Pogo's girlfriend was released after she said she wasn't aware she was obliterating his footprints, only trying to get a close look at the car. She also said she tried to stop Pogo but he was drunk and couldn't be controlled. She had never seen him do anything like this before, but he had been under a great deal of pressure after losing his job recently.

In an interview the next day, Pogo felt remorseful and admitted setting the two fires the night before. At one point, Pogo was read a list of the other fires, types of vehicles and their address. Asked if he recalled starting any other cars on fire, Pogo responded, "Yeah."

He was also asked if at any time he had been aware of the surveillance conducted on him. (Several of the surveillance team indicated that they felt Pogo "made" them as police during the five-night-long watch.) Pogo seemed genuinely surprised that he had been followed.

Pogo was subsequently convicted, after pleading guilty to two counts of arson. He was originally charged with five counts. In all, he was suspected of at least nine fires, totaling \$98,000 in damages.

He was sentenced to three years in jail, served two and was released. Within three months of his release, three other cars were burned within blocks of his home.

*Continued on next page*





The Prescott (Ariz) Fire Department can be excused for playing games. One of the most difficult audiences to reach is the junior high school student, but the Prescott Fire Department has designed a successful fire education program using a unique game-show format. Known as "Fire Trap," it has proved both educational and fun.

The 50-minute program begins with 20 minutes of fast-paced questions and answers. Opposing teams are given the chance to outscore their opponents with correct answers and quick reflexes.

Fire Trap team members respond to a question by pressing their buttons on the game panel, which in turn, initiates a buzzer and light for the team. If a team answers correctly, 10 points are scored. If a team answers incorrectly, the opposing team may answer for double the points.

The questions are multiple choice and written with the junior high student in mind. Some examples:

1. Gasoline vapors are: a) heavier than air, b) odorless, c) lighter than air.
2. Most fire pumpers carry enough hose to stretch approximately one-half mile. How many feet of hose do they carry? a) 2,500 ft., b) 4,000 ft., c) 3,500 ft.
3. If you smell natural gas, you should: a) leave the house and call for help, b) turn on the lights and investigate, c) ignore it and see if it gets stronger.
4. Carbon monoxide is produced by most fires. What effect does it have on you before it makes you sleepy and kills you? a) it smells bad and makes you cough, b) it gives you no warning of its presence, c) it disturbs your co-

ordination and judgment.

5. A person who intentionally sets an illegal fire is committing a crime of: a) larceny, b) arson, c) vagrancy.

6. Firefighters use foam to: a) wash equipment b) extinguish flammable liquid fires, c) shave.

7. The high tower on most fire stations is used for: a) practice, it is a drill tower, b) a fire watch tower c) drying hose, it is a hose tower.

Total team points accrued during the first 20 minutes are carried over to the muster segment, where either team can take control and win the game.

The second portion of Fire Trap is conducted outside and consists of a bucket brigade competition, relay race in turnouts and hose crawl activity. Each event is worth 50 points to the winning team.

Winning teams from each junior high school participate in a final year-end muster to determine the grand champions.

Student and teacher responses to Fire Trap have been good. Students participating in the program have

demonstrated an extensive knowledge of key fire safety behaviors and information, responding to questions both quickly and correctly.

The students participating in the program have been exposed to the Prescott Fire Department's ongoing and comprehensive K-6 grade fire safety education program throughout their elementary school years.

For more information write to: Prescott Fire Department, 1700 Iron Springs Road, Prescott, Arizona 86301.

— Sharon Doty  
Education Specialists  
Prescott (AZ) F.D.

## INVESTIGATE...

Continued from previous page

Shortly thereafter, Pogo agreed to be videotaped for a training film for arson investigators. The tape, used only locally per agreement with Pogo, highlights a great deal of his insecurities and inability to deal with life.

Pogo still has trouble with relationships, as well as employment. He continues to drink, and lies incessantly. When he talks of the fires, he smiles broadly and talks candidly, but other topics cause him to withdraw.

Incidentally, Pogo denies setting any fires since his release. . . .



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